10 Things You Should Know about the Anabaptists and their Theology

Sam Storms

So, as we continue our study of the Protestant Reformation, we now turn to the Anabaptists and what they believed. Continue reading...

So, as we continue our study of the Protestant Reformation, we now turn to the Anabaptists and what they believed.

Among those involved in the reformation in Zurich were some who believed efforts at purifying the church were moving too slowly. They called for a more radical break with Rome and with society as a whole. They insisted that adults who had been baptized as infants be re-baptized; hence, the name Anabaptists (lit., baptize again; although it should be pointed out that they themselves repudiated this label; as far as they were concerned, infant “baptism” was a mere “washing” and not genuine “baptism”, for infants are incapable of faith and repentance [the conditions for Christian baptism]; thus, one could not truly be re-baptized if he/she had not been truly “baptized” in the first place).

(1) The leader among the Anabaptists in Switzerland was Conrad Grebel (1498-1526), an early disciple of Zwingli's. At one meeting Grebel re-baptized George Blaurock (1491-1529), who in turn re-baptized a group of adults. Zwingli tried to persuade them of the errors of re-baptism both in private and in a public debate (Jan. 17, 1525). Following two more public disputations the magistracy ruled against the Anabaptists and threatened them with expulsion from the city if they did not practice paedo-baptism (infant baptism) exclusively.

(2) The Anabaptists refused and protested in the streets of Zurich. Grebel, Blaurock, and Felix Manz (1498-1527) were arrested and charged with revolutionary teaching. The civil authorities implemented the penalty of death by drowning (“He who dips shall be dipped!”), a cruel parody of the Anabaptist doctrine (indeed, “drowning” was called “the third baptism”). Six executions occurred in Zurich between 1527 and 1532. Manz was the first to die: he was thrown, bound hand and foot, into the Limmat River on January 5, 1527. He thus became the first “Protestant” martyr to die at the hands of other Protestants. Grebel died in prison and Blaurock was scourged through the streets of Zurich

before being banished. In the first 10 years of its history, more than 5,000 Anabaptists were executed in Switzerland alone. By 1535 the movement was all but extinct there.

(3) Anabaptists fared little better in Germany. They were led by Balthasar Hubmaier (1481-1528) who was burned at the stake in Vienna on March 10, 1528. His wife was drowned in the Danube by the RCC. Before his death, however, Hubmaier had taken the movement into Moravia where, in the course of time, it became transformed into the Hutterite movement whose leader was the Anabaptist Jacob Hutter (d. 1536).

Before his conversion to Protestantism, Hubmaier had been one of Europe’s best-known RC leaders. He formed a congregation in Waldshut, near Zurich, by baptizing 300 adults out of a milk pail (many Anabaptists practiced baptism by effusion – pouring – rather than immersion). Hubmaier sided with Erasmus and against Luther and Augustine on the issue of free will, but with Zwingli and against Luther on the issue of the Lord’s Supper.

(4) The most damaging blemish on the Anabaptist reputation came from an incident at Munster in Westphalia (near the Dutch border), Germany. Melchior Hofmann, an early student of Luther's, believed that Christ was to return in 1533 at Strasbourg, a city destined to become the New Jerusalem. The leaders of Strasbourg rewarded Hofmann with imprisonment (he died there in 1543). Hofmann was succeeded by Jan Matthyszoon, who declared himself to be Enoch, whom Hofmann had said would appear just before the return of Christ. Matthyszoon proclaimed that Munster, not Strasbourg, was to be the New Jerusalem, and re-located there with thousands of his followers. The city was organized in a communistic fashion and was soon surrounded by soldiers from both the RCC and Lutheran churches. Matthyszoon was killed in battle in April of 1534 and John of Leyden took charge. Basing his movement on the OT, he introduced polygamy, took a harem for himself, and appointed 12 elders to rule the 12 tribes of "the New Israel". On June 24, 1535, the siege finally ended when the city was captured and the Anabaptist leaders were tortured and executed. Their mutilated bodies were then suspended from the steeple of St. Lambert's Church. The incident evoked condemnations from both RC and Protestant leaders alike.

(5) John of Leyden's introduction of polygamy was motivated by more than biblical conviction! He lusted for the beautiful young widow of Matthyszoon and thought that by marrying her he would boost his own claim to leadership of the movement. There was also a disproportionate number of women to men in the city, due to the

heavy casualties of war. Polygamy thus “provided not only the means of increasing the population in preparation for the return of Christ . . . but also the means of subjugating all women to male authority” (Lindberg, 223). As expected, not all the women responded favorably. Those who dissented were imprisoned. John himself beheaded and trampled the body of one of his wives in the marketplace. Dissent came to a swift end! When one adds all this to the fact that John had himself anointed and crowned as “king of righteousness” and “the ruler of the new Zion”, the similarities to David Koresh (Waco and the Branch Davidians) become frighteningly apparent.

(6) In the Netherlands, under the leadership of Menno Simons (1496-1561), who left the RC priesthood in 1536, the excesses and fanaticism of the movement in Germany and Switzerland were avoided. They adopted the name Brethren (largely to avoid the stigma of the name Anabaptist) and after Simons' death were known as Mennonites. They continued to stress pacifism and separation of church and state in the strictest sense possible. They were granted freedom of religion in 1676.

One of the doctrines for which Simons has become known pertains to Christology and the nature of Christ’s humanity. Wanting to guard the humanity of Jesus from any stain of sin, Simons argued that “Jesus’ human nature was a creation of God the Father in heaven, and it was placed in Mary by the Holy Spirit through whom it entered into the world without taking anything substantial from Mary” (Olson, 427).

(7) It must be asked, “Why was there such vehement and violent opposition to the Anabaptists?” The answer is found in understanding Zwingli's medieval conception of the relationship between church and state.

Zwingli (as also Luther and Calvin) had conceived of Zurich as a Christian state, a single unified Christian society in which church and state maintained a reciprocal relationship of trust and assistance. The visible church was co-extensive with the local community. As Thompson explains, "implicit in this design was the continuation of the Catholic practice of baptizing infants, because the primary way by which such a society perpetuates itself is by the baptism of every infant who comes to life within it. When the Anabaptists trifled with Zwingli's grand design of a *corpus Christianum*, when they demanded the immediate destruction of the Roman Mass, they threatened the order and stability of that Christian state" (462). The Anabaptists were thus viewed as a threat to the stability of the social order and less as mere theological heretics.

The Anabaptists conceived of the church as utterly distinct from the state. The members of the body of Christ are not coterminous with either society as whole or the state or even the historic church. The body of Christ is a gathered group of believers, the badge of which is baptism. Thus it occurred to the Anabaptists that "all those who were seriously committed to the religious standards of the New Testament would have to be drawn out of society, not into it, would have to be drawn out of the historic church, not into it, gathered into little communities of the saints, into little righteous remnants, admission to which was exclusively by the baptism of consciously true believers, which meant inevitably adults, not children. That was a most shattering, far-reaching conception indeed" (463).

Zwingli himself saw two primary threats coming from the Anabaptists. First, Zwingli believed the success of the reformation depended on governmental support. Only by mutual protection could church and state survive. When the Anabaptists repudiated the normal obligations of citizenship such as the taking of public oaths, paying tithes to the state, and military service (most were pacifists), they were seen as social and civic revolutionaries who threatened the stability of society and thus of the church as well.

Second, the Anabaptists appeared to turn Zwingli's own weapon on himself: the Scriptures. Taking his advice to study the Bible for themselves, they could find no warrant for infant baptism or for the union of church and state. Their reading of the Sermon on the Mount led them to implement its principles with slavish literalism. "Zwingli, like Luther, experienced the shock of having his own followers read very differently the biblical text he had so labored to make available to them" (Lindberg, 203). Needless to say, this is precisely what the RCC said would happen if ordinary lay-folk were given the Bible in their own language!

(8) Some prefer not to speak of the Anabaptists in terms of their geographical location but rather in theological categories. Three groups are identified: First, ***Revolutionary Anabaptists***, who worked to establish an OT theocracy. These, of course, would be the more radical Anabaptists who gathered at Munster. Second, ***Contemplative Anabaptists***, who emphasized the inner word and tended toward mysticism. John Denck, an anti-Trinitarian, was chief among their leaders. Third, ***Evangelical Anabaptists***, among whom were Hubmaier, Grebel and Blaurock, who stressed simplicity of life, strict adherence to the ethical teachings of Jesus, pacifism, and rigid separation from the world.

(9) It is difficult to speak of Anabaptist theology because they resisted any attempt to formulate either doctrine or creedal declarations. Also, few of them lived long

enough to write substantial treatises on theology! However, there are several distinctives worth noting:

Basic to Anabaptist thought is an uncompromising dualism or opposition between the values of the world and the believing community. Absolute separation is essential. Communal life, together with a refusal to align oneself with any national movement or state body, characterized Anabaptist existence. [The modern Amish are an example of the attempt to sustain this view even today.]

Anabaptists were Semi-Pelagian in their view of original sin and free will. They said little of the saving work of Christ and more of one's obligation to walk obediently in the path of holiness that he blazed. As noted above, Hubmaier and Simons, perhaps the two leading thinkers among the Anabaptists, rigorously opposed the Augustinian view espoused by Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin. Salvation was viewed corporately rather than individually.

One Anabaptist author explains it this way:

> “In Catholicism the believer is offered, as the only effective way to God and salvation, an intermediary, the institutional church with its reservoir of divine grace, and with its ordained priests who dispense the sacraments. In Protestantism this intermediary was radically done away with. Every individual believer stands in direct, unmediated relationship to his God, seeking and finding redemption by faith. . . . In Anabaptism, finally, the answer is a combination of a vertical with a horizontal relationship. Here the thesis is accepted that man cannot come to God except together with his brother. In other words, the brother . . . constitutes an essential element of one's personal redemption” (Friedman, 80-81).

In addition, they denied the forensic doctrine of justification by faith and tended to identify justification with sanctification, in which the love and power of God in us is central. "A forensic view of grace, in which the sinner is forgiven and undeservedly justified, is simply unacceptable to the existential faith of the Anabaptists" (Friedman, 91).

There is no such thing as the invisible church. The church is always visible and distinct from the world. The communal approach to church life as found in Acts 2-4 was emphasized. There was no distinction between clergy and laity.

(10) Roger Olson summarizes Anabaptism this way:

> “Anabaptist theology may be summarized by saying that it was an attempt by radical Protestant Reformers to complete the Protestant Reformation by recovering the Christianity of the apostolic era. It was radically anti-Constantinian in its view of the church and its relations with secular rulers. It was radically anti-Augustinian in its view of salvation and the Christian life. The Anabaptists emphasized personal, conscious decision of repentance and faith and holy living as disciples of Christ to the exclusion of any idea of salvation as a gift imparted sacramentally. They extended Zwingli’s symbolic interpretation of the Lord’s Supper to baptism and insisted that since infants cannot repent or believe the gospel, baptism should be given only to those who repent after reaching the age of accountability” (428).

Original Link:
https://www.samstorms.org/enjoying-god-blog/post/10-things-you-should-know-about-the-anabaptists-and-their-theology